



FOOD SECURITY FOR EQUITABLE FUTURES

Project Newsletter



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WORKSHOP#2 IN INDIA WITH OUR EXPERT STAKEHOLDERS

Our qualitative team have spent the last three months in the field collecting in depth interview data in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Goa (you can read more about this on page 3, 4 & 5. of this newsletter). During this period, we also hosted our second project workshop, where we were able to meet with several of our brilliant project stakeholders. Our fantastic qualitative team shared details about the current state of data collection, preliminary insights from the field, and also some queries about challenges they were facing during data collection. We received valuable input from our stakeholders on project plans overall, and on our ongoing fieldwork in particular. We also started making early plans for workshop 3, which will be held in India in 2024. Alongside the workshop, we will offer substantive and methodological short courses for researchers working on food insecurity. The courses will be free and will include a small bursary to cover travel, but space will be limited. If you are interested in these courses, please keep up with our social media and project website, where we will be posting further details. Many thanks to our stakeholders for their generosity in sharing their time and insights with us!



OUR TEAM WITH STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPANTS AT WORKSHOP 2, GOA



QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK UPDATE

A PIECE BY CHARUMITA VASUDEV

TOY OR SWEETS, A TOUGH CHOICE: LESSONS FROM YOUNG CHILDREN



As a qualitative researcher in the field, you often meet people who are in challenging circumstances. Sometimes, these faces and interviews get etched in your memory. They act as constant reminders of the importance of your own work and inspire you to be better, for them.

In the past two months of fieldwork for the project, what really stood out for me were my interactions with children (aged 7 to 18), all exceptional in their own unique way. Their lucid understanding of their surroundings took me aback and broke my heart at times while at other times gave unprecedented insights into the family's situation. I heard "Growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional". For numerous young kids, the ignorant bliss of childhood was never an option.

Several children were working in the fields as family labour. Girls as young as 10-11 years were cooking for the entire family, washing utensils, washing clothes, filling water and making sure everyone had eaten, in addition to attending school. "No, I don't feel hungry"; "I don't like to eat anything"; "I keep playing in the recess, so no one notices I have not eaten"; "I don't make demands". Such phrases showed children's awareness about the circumstances of the family and how they learnt to hide or adapt to hunger and optimise resources. An 8 year old in Goa recounted how she did not spend 5 Rs given to her for samosas (snack) for three weeks and instead saved for Maggi which (mixed with some rice) could act as an entire meal for her entire family of five. A 9-year-old in Uttar Pradesh explained how he loves to eat Jalebi (a sweet), but never buys it because he knows his family can either afford a food item from the village fair or a toy, not both.

Despite the adverse circumstances in which these children navigate their everyday lives, I noticed how they had internalised sharing whatever little they had with everyone around. In Goa, we took children to a nearby temple to interview them. On our way back home, we offered to buy them something from the local shop. To our surprise, they never bought smaller things like a chocolate. For the same money, they chose to buy a packet of chips, which could be shared. It was a delight to watch them call out to others to share what they had just bought! On another occasion, I had a candy which I offered to the child I was interviewing. She continued to talk to me and, without a thought, bit the candy in half and put the other half in her younger sister's mouth.

The field teaches you a lot, but when you get to learn life lessons from young kids, you really do come back richer!



QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK UPDATE

A PIECE BY ANKITA RATHI NAVIGATING AGRARIAN SAFETY NETS AND UNCERTAINTIES IN THE FIELD



The fieldwork for Food Security for Equitable Futures commenced in December 2022, and was undertaken in two diverse regions in India, i.e., Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Goa. We collected qualitative data on the divergent experiences of families and individuals of food insecurity and the inherent inequalities it produces.

Amidst the diversity in experiences and the multitude of arrangements that families make for their everyday survival, one aspect that really stood out to me is the critical ways in which the rural--particularly the agrarian--economy in India acts a safety net and supports families in times of hardship and uncertainty. Small and marginal tenant families from rural UP commonly spoke of storing grains, typically wheat and rice post the harvest, and using it for lean and uncertain periods. In fact, it seemed like a common practise that enabled them to rely less on cash and the market for food. In case they do need cash to meet an unexpected health or economic crisis, they often sell their buffer food grains. Even in urban areas, agriculture offered safety nets for urban wage labourers, mostly migrant workers, who often cannot access food schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS; which provides state subsidized food grains) because of not having the proper documents. In a peri-urban site in Goa, migrant workers from the neighbouring state of Karnataka (a nearby state) rely on their rural familial networks to send them basic food items like-wheat, rice, and jowar. Such networks enabled these families to meet the rising cost of living and surviving in the city. For those migrant workers who came from far off villages from the eastern parts of the country, returning back to the village and relying on agriculture was a safety net that offered shelter and culturally familiar food that often remains inaccessible or unaffordable in the city where they have been working.

Having recognized the safety nets that the agriculture sector offers, I also recognized that it is not untethered from precarity. With the extensive shift towards wheat and rice cultivation, wheat and rice UP and rice in Goa are the only food items distributed through the PDS. This has economic and social implications for families struggling to meet their food expenses. Many families expressed that receiving food items such as sugar, oil, salt and lentils through the PDS can offer great relief as they continuously worry about rising cost, jobs and uncertain crop production. Families often rely on loans to meet the rising cost of cultivating wheat and rice. This often constrained their aspiration to consume diversified food items. It also puts extensive pressure on families, particularly women and young school children, to engage in multiple forms of paid and unpaid work to pay back the loan. It is some of these everyday realities of surviving and navigating through precarity is what I intend to explore further through this project.



QUALITATIVE FIELDWORK UPDATE

A PIECE BY SWAYAMSHREE MISHRA

FIELDWORK REFLECTIONS: CONSTRAINTS, DILEMMAS, AND RESILIENCE



Fieldwork is a challenging and emotionally draining exercise but, at the same time, a rewarding one. Both field sites gave us unique challenges and learnings. No amount of training or experience could have prepared us to transition from one emotionally draining interview to a relatively happier one. While on days when children or adults cried, I learned to exercise detachment, on other days, cheerful children and adults in highly precarious conditions taught me the power of resilience. Some conversations remained with me as little pockets of happiness. For instance, when a child (eight years) shared how she taught her parents to eat a balanced diet even when they had less money, it gave me hope.

Regardless of training and experience, one is always new to the field - its culture, problems, boundaries, and secrets. Thus, despite conducting several interviews across two months, every interview seemed different. It was interesting to observe how adults and children perceived the same question differently, even in the same household. Similarly, as I moved from the city to the villages or entered homes from diverse caste, class, and religious backgrounds, the stories and concerns around food changed. Depending on the context, I had to make immediate and important decisions on aspects like where to stop probing, how to handle emotions, how far one can offer help, and how to re-direct conversations to research questions, amongst other concerns.

Now that the fieldwork is over, I look back and reflect on how the field was also my training ground that gave me the ability to improve as a researcher on a daily basis - something that I miss currently as I transcribe and translate data. On hearing the recorded interviews, I often fixate on the "missed opportunities" in the field where I could have probed a bit further or noted a particularly long pause. There is a sense of helplessness since immediate access to the field is no longer there. This feeling will probably fade as I gradually read deeply into the "possible lapses" and immerse myself with familiar voices and reimagine contexts. The beauty of spending months in the field is that your methodological lapses can also act as innovative gateways to understanding the field.

PUBLICATIONS & MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

'THE CONVERSATION' ARTICLE CO-AUTHORED BY DR. JASMINE FLEDDERJOHANN

8 BILLION PEOPLE: WHY TRYING TO CONTROL THE POPULATION IS OFTEN FUTILE – AND HARMFUL

In this short research-informed article for The Conversation, the project PI Dr. Jasmine Fledderjohann collaborated with Dr. Melanie Channon to challenge the myths of population alarmism, and why such arguments are "misguided and fundamentally answering the wrong question". The article highlights, contrary to population alarmist talking points, that "the population growth rate peaked 50 years ago (around 1962-65) and is now less than 1% per year." Of relevance to this project, the article highlights that restricting population growth through reproductive coercion is not an acceptable solution for global food security challenges.



The full article is available [here](#).

This article gained quite a lot of popularity, and has been quoted by almost 20 national and international news outlets including Yahoo News, The Hindu, The Scotsman, Firstpost, etc., creating wide reach impact. It sparked interest with the wide audience and we had over 100 public comments engaging with the content. It has gained 145 mentions on Twitter and a keen interest from news sites, including multiple invitations for broadcast news interviews (news interviews completed in Scotland and France).

'JOURNAL OF NUTRITION' PAPER LED BY DR. THOMAS ARGAW

CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AND PERSISTENCE AND SEVERITY OF HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY IN INDIA: LONGITUDINAL EVIDENCE FROM YOUNG LIVES

This paper adds to a small but growing literature exploring how household food insecurity is associated with children's educational outcomes in the Global South. The team found that food insecurity is associated with fewer years of completed education and lower maths and vocabulary scores. More persistent and more severe food insecurity compounded the negative effects of household food insecurity on children's learning outcomes. Addressing household food insecurity in childhood and adolescence may be a key factor to improve children's educational outcomes.



The paper has generated interest among journalist and the general public. [NutritionInsight](#) wrote a feature piece about the article, which included in-depth comments from Dr. Argaw. There are around 20 news and blog sites circulating this paper authored by our team.



EXPERT INTERVIEW SERIES



Don't forget to explore our Expert Interview Series on [YouTube](#). Previous videos include discussions with Dr. Alula Pankhurst, Mr. V R Raman, Dr. Lam Van Phong, Dr. Vuong Ngoc Thuy and Dr. Eduardo Zegarra.

Our next interview, featuring a conversation between team member Dr. Ankita Rathi and Mr. Haldhar Mahto, an Indian public policy expert, who is currently working with the Grievance Redressal System in Ranchi, Jharkhand India, will be available soon. Prior to this, Mr. Mahto worked as the member of the State Food Commission, Government of Jharkhand, and was actively associated with various campaigns such as Right to Food and Jan Swastha Abhiyan (People's Health Movement) in India. Mr. Mahto has actively engaged in working on issues specific to food insecurity, public health, and governance in India, particularly in Jharkhand (an east Indian state). Mr. Mahto offers a micro understanding of the food insecurity and nutritional challenges amongst tribal communities in India. Landlessness, denied rights and lack of entitlement, a shift to market-based agriculture (single-crop farming of wheat and rice), climate change induced disasters, and lack of decentralized governance are some of the primary factors he identifies as leading to nutritional deprivation and food insecurity amongst tribal and marginal agricultural communities in India. He explains the centrality of existing social policies such as Public Distribution System and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in combating hunger and starvation amongst the marginalized tribal and agrarian communities. He highlights some of the key challenges of the existing social policies- in terms of service delivery to remote areas, excessive reliance on private players and issues of inclusion and exclusion. Decentralized local governance and institutions such as Panchayats (rural governing body in India) and a shift to multi-crop farming as key to addressing regional food insecurity in India are discussed as important potential solutions.